

Collaboration in Action: Joining Forces with Peers to Create Positive Impact



BY JIM LAY

The need for collaboration is a message frequently advocated by education thought leaders as they articulate the essential requirements for developing and sustaining our educational systems. The message goes something like this: It is critical that organizations engage in collaboration among individuals and groups who share a common vision in order for those individuals and groups to achieve that vision. But it is when the concept of collaboration moves from a good idea to action that real impact occurs. It was with that action-oriented intent that Robert Sommers, CEO of Butler Technology (Butler Tech) and Career Development

Schools, envisioned a network group in early 2004 with core activities of information, process and data sharing. Sommers foresaw great potential in this collaborative approach to accelerate the concurrent development of member organizations. He commissioned research to identify like-minded schools and school leaders to convene at the December 2004 ACTE Annual Convention to pursue this concept. This core group of pioneering schools formed the Career-Tech Baldrige Network (CTBN) agreeing to embark on this successful collaboration that continues to make a meaningful, positive impact on the students and communities served by its member schools.

The Network

What began as an experiment in learning and growing together back in 2004 has become an essential organizational development tool for 10 dynamic career-technical schools from throughout the U.S. These schools—Butler Tech in Fairfield Township, Ohio; Central Education Center in Newnan, Georgia; Clark County Skills Center in Vancouver, Washington; Francis Tuttle Technology Center and Metro Technology Center in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Lake County Technology Campus in Grayslake, Illinois; Moore Norman Technology Center in Norman, Oklahoma; Upper Valley Joint Vocational School in Piqua, Ohio; Tri County Tech-

nology Center in Bartlesville, Oklahoma; and Auburn Career Center in Concord Township, Ohio—have lifted the concept of collaborative learning and development from a possibility with potential to a part of the routine of improving the educational experience they provide and the educational performance results their students achieve.

Schools participating in the network are diverse in size, in location and in their approach to the way they operate. They each have unique challenges and circumstances. But despite these inherent differences, they share a common bond of relying on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria as a development framework as well as a common set of organizational and individual characteristics and commitments that cement this collaboration together. First and foremost, these schools demonstrate they are leaders in student performance and are committed to doing what is right and required for student success. They have found themselves seeking comparison with not just their local or state peers, but also nationally in order to truly understand their performance effectiveness. Through this comparison process, they seek to propel themselves to the highest possible level of performance success in a context beyond their local environment.

Sharing Information

Member schools are willing to share openly what they are doing and how they are doing it, and they expect the same from their peers. They recognize that there is something valuable to learn not only from those who do things in a similar fashion, but also from those who take an entirely different approach to the same challenge or the delivery of the same type of program. Participating schools are committed to a multi-level involvement with entire leadership teams and additional team members actively involved in the networking and benchmarking processes. Teachers, adminis-

trators and superintendents/CEOs meet together and share their unique perspectives while also learning from and sharing with their peers. With a founding mission to “accelerate development and improve performance of the nation’s excellence-driven career-technical schools through real-time, proactive data and knowledge sharing,” the network members do not wish to establish bylaws, elect officers or build levels of organizational administration; they share a bias to act rather than a routine of meeting to discuss what they might be able to do.

At CTBN meetings, which occur twice per year on a rotating basis at member school sites, these school leaders take action. Meetings are held for three days in the spring and fall and their agendas include benchmarking each others’ programs and processes, sharing performance and operating data, and developing peer level resource networks of staff members at multiple levels of the organization to support organizational development. The group’s meetings balance a showcase/sharing process for the host school with discussion of key issues and challenges being faced in their own schools as well as in career/technical schools in general. The agenda for the three-day meetings is divided equally between development of in-depth knowledge of the programs and processes of the host schools and the discussion of individual school and group-level issues and opportunities.

This is all accomplished in a fashion that is not a drain on the financial resources of the organization. Anita Risner, superintendent of Tri County Technology Center in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, sees significant benefit for limited financial investment. “We are a small school with limited resources,” Risner says. “The network has given us experts in our field at little cost. The opportunities to share have been invaluable to us.”

The Value of Collaboration

At its essence, the value of this collaborative process is to find ways for member schools to do the things they do in a more effective fashion by drawing on best practices of fellow members. “We take home new ideas every time we visit a partner school,” relates Ruth Giddens, assistant to the superintendent for curriculum and instructional support at the Metro Technology Center in Oklahoma City. “As a result of the Clark County Skills Center visit, we are currently working with a local credit union to locate a branch site at our information technology center. This will provide an exceptional opportunity for authentic work-based learning experience for our students.”

It is that commitment to finding the best practices among its members that

Collaborative Learning Career-Technical Schools

Butler Tech

Fairfield Township, Ohio

Central Education Center

Newnan, Georgia

Clark County Skills Center

Vancouver, Washington Francis

Francis Tuttle Technology Center and Metro Technology Center

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Lake County Technology Campus

Grayslake, Illinois

Moore Norman Technology Center

Norman, Oklahoma

Upper Valley Joint Vocational School

Piqua, Ohio

Tri County Technology Center

Bartlesville, Oklahoma

Auburn Career Center

Concord Township, Ohio

has led the member schools to recently begin a process of using collaboratively developed assessment tools to collect data on common process performance. In the past year, surveys were provided to new students at member schools to assess the effectiveness of the student recruitment and on-boarding processes. Results from these surveys led to presentations by the highest performing schools in each area at the next meeting of the network—which in turn led to process and system changes at the individual school level based on lessons learned. Giddens continued, “As a result, Metro Tech changed the enrollment process this school year to allow students to enroll only in their first-choice program. The results already show a huge decline in student transfers and drops. This kind of effort paid off in student success.”

Improvements have not just been limited to the process or program level. Interaction with his peers in the network led Mark Whitlock, CEO of Central Education Center in Newnan, Georgia, to make a fundamental change in the way that his district uses data to drive its performance review and improvement. “We have learned to become more specific in our measurement systems. Our colleagues in the group help to reinforce the idea that ‘if you don’t measure it specifically, it

won’t be important.’” The key to success for member organizations is the willingness to accept and share that much of what they are doing is not as good as it could or needs to be. In fact, members are encouraged to share their areas of greatest need for improvement as part of the group’s visit to their campus. The goal here is to not only share what you do best, but use the time with your peers as a chance to mine the rich knowledge and experience base available to you. What makes this work effectively is that “none of us are satisfied with ‘good enough’” says Risner, whose school hosted the network’s most recent meeting in October. “The Career Tech Network has been a great resource for finding out where the best practices are and helping us see other ways of meeting the needs of our students.”

The network does not limit its scope to only the development of its members. With the rapidly emerging shift in the education “market” from a monopoly government service to a customer-driven, free market, there is a fundamental need to develop a way to define educational quality in terms of benefit to the customer/student. Toward that end, multiple network members, including Sommers, have taken an active role in the ACTE Career-Technical Education Performance

Taskforce, formed to help ACTE develop an effective way to report performance measurement in ways that allow members to thrive in this changing and competitive environment. Through helping to position ACTE as the catalyst to help put student performance to work for the benefit of the profession rather than seeing it as a legal compliance issue, the network’s leaders are helping to shape a positive future for career and technical education (CTE).

Expanding the Network

There is a continuing desire to expand the network to include like-minded, high-performing schools in order to continue to challenge members to continue to grow and develop. The network continues to raise the bar for itself as well, knowing that its membership roster could always be strengthened through the addition of like-minded schools that share the values that provide the foundation for this network. This is a never-ending process, and the need for continued fresh perspective is essential for the value and impact to be sustained. Where is this collaboration headed as it continues to grow? In terms of its core activities of information, process and data sharing, there is much work to do to accelerate the effectiveness of the group’s ongoing work. “I would like to see the group establish a common

measurement system that would allow us to compare student performance in our efforts toward continuous improvement,” adds Giddens. There is no question that different state systems and reporting requirements make this direct comparison challenging, but the group is committed to eliminating that barrier.

Looking Ahead

As the network considers its future from the perspective of the national system for CTE, there is much work to do. Whitlock envisions a role where “this group can/should become a leading-edge national effort to guide CTE into measuring its true ROI for local communities. This group can help local communities better understand ways that CTE benefits the entire community.” This collaboration is not without its flaws and challenges. There is significant pressure on schedules that makes it difficult to find time for

busy educational leaders to come together for three consecutive days, twice yearly. There are constant challenges to find truly comparative data given the differences in reporting requirements and definitions from state to state. But the network’s members recognize the value of persevering to find ways to overcome these obstacles because of the significant benefit that is available through this collaboration.

Tom Friedemann, chief of staff at Francis Tuttle Technology Center, captures this value. “If I could borrow from a sports vernacular, I view the network as being a super conference of the best technology centers in the country who are consistently seeking ways to put the customer first through the use of data. While there isn’t a competitive piece in the network, it’s amazing how willing each institution is to share with other members about practices that work for them. After

each session, I always sense a genuine eagerness to go back to our schools to see how we can implement something we’ve learned on the trip. It is a constant source of fresh ideas which I feel is the fuel that feeds the engine of successful organizations and keeps them at the top of their game.” ■

Jim Lay

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